

Once Upon A Time

# When We Were Colored

CLIFTON TAULBERT

**S**urely if my Uncle Cleve were alive today, he'd find a reason to be a black Republican. He was short, neatly dressed, and conservative. Uncle Cleve came from Coldwater, Mississippi. I know very little about his early life with my great-aunt Willie, but I do recall his strong personality and the impact he had on my life growing up in Glen Allan.

I never heard him raise his voice. When he talked, he always talked politics and demonstrated a real business sense. Independence and nonconversance<sup>1</sup> were his most notable characteristics. I called him Uncle Cleve, Ma Ponk called him Bro. Cleve, and every other colored person called him Mr. Cleve. The white community with which he had contact called him Mormon, his last name, their badge of respect.

Uncle Cleve, Mr. Cleve, Bro. Cleve, or Mormon—he was my first employer. From him, I learned a sense of responsibility that undergirds my approach today. He ran the only icehouse in town. Refrigerators were a

rarity in the colored community and among the poor whites, and nearly all the small businesses used ice to keep their goods from spoiling. Only Mr. Cleve provided the ice needed in Glen Allan. Twice daily, we'd see him driving the red flatbed truck up and down the streets, announcing "The iceman is here." For years, I would run alongside the truck as Uncle Cleve stopped at each house and chipped his sales of fifteen or thirty pounds of ice. Occasionally someone would buy fifty pounds, but that was rare. He was always quick, responsive, and very polite—not given to extra conversation when waiting on his customer. His business made our lives better, and he was always received as a welcome sight.

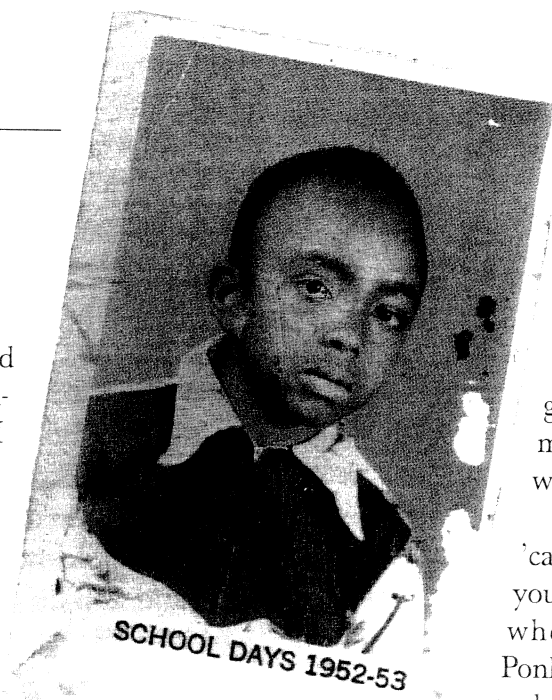
Being an assistant to Mr. Cleve was viewed as a good job, and I couldn't wait until I was old enough to work with my cousin Joe, Uncle Cleve's son. Uncle Cleve had been training me by taking me with him to Hollandale, Mississippi, to buy ice from

1. **nonconversance**: a term used here to describe Uncle Cleve's habit of saying very little.

Words  
to Know  
and Use

**conservative** (kən sər' ve tiv) *adj.* traditional in style and manner  
**impact** (im' pakt) *n.* a strong effect  
**responsive** (ri spän' siv) *adj.* quick to react to another

Clifton Taulbert as a child.  
Courtesy, Council Oak Books.



the ice factory. We would ride to Hollandale together, just the two of us. I recall the trip taking hours, but really it was very short. We'd drive down the road eating salami and crackers, and every once in a while he would talk to me about life.

"Yes, git you a good pattern and follow it. Always be early for work, and save fifty cents out of every dollar you make."

I didn't try to answer. I just sat in the cab of the truck and listened as he continued talking. All I wanted was the chance to show him that I could handle the big three-hundred-pound blocks of ice. If I could prove my ability to handle the big blocks, he would let me work at his icehouse.

Finally one Saturday, he gave me the chance. I must have been about twelve years old. Child-labor laws weren't in *vogue* in Glen Allan, and when you were strong enough to handle the job, nobody worried about how old you were. I could hardly sleep the Friday night before, although Ma

Ponk had no problem getting me into bed on my little cot by the front windows.

"Boy, git to bed early, 'cause Bro. Cleve will leave you if you ain't ready to go when he comes by," Ma Ponk told me as she securely tucked me in bed.

Saturday morning didn't come soon enough. I found myself waking up nearly every hour, straining my eyes to see the hands on the clock. Finally I heard Ma Ponk's voice through the quilts. "Cliff, git up and git some food in you, 'cause you know Bro. Cleve ain't gonna stop."

No sooner had she spoken than I jumped from bed and ran to get the wash pan so I could wash up before eating my breakfast. The smell of hot oil sausages and grits<sup>2</sup> floated through the house, and I could hardly wait. How lucky could I be—a trip to Hollandale with Uncle Cleve, *and* my favorite breakfast. The food went fast, and I

2. **grits**: short for *hominy grits*, a popular Southern dish made of coarsely ground dry corn.

found myself ready and waiting when Uncle Cleve came by. True to form, he was a little early.

"Bye, Ma Ponk!" I yelled as I jumped from the porch to the ground.

Our trip was not unusual, but this time I would have the chance to show my uncle that I was big enough to help him with the business.

"Cleve, pull your truck in next," a colored man yelled as we pulled up to the Hollandale Icehouse.

Uncle Cleve let me out of the cab and told me to take the steps to the dock; he'd meet me there. He never made suggestions. You simply did what he told you, and quickly. After parking the truck so the bed would be against the dock, Uncle Cleve came around to the side where I was standing.

"OK, Cliff, we'll see if you can handle the big one."

As we walked into the icehouse, all I could see was a cold vapor rising from hundreds of blocks of ice. Each block weighed three hundred pounds. Standing inside the door, I felt the chill as Uncle Cleve took the giant ice hook off the wall.

"Cliff, pay attention." Uncle Cleve proceeded to show me how to put the ice hook securely into the block while using my knee as an anchor.

I watched and I watched and I watched. Finally, it was my turn. I walked over to a huge block of ice and carefully repeated what I had been shown many times. I securely hooked my ice, carefully placed my knee, and began to gently pull the block to the floor. Before I could get fearful, I had

finished. The three-hundred-pound block of ice was on the floor, and I was pulling it out to the truck.

"New helper you got, Mormon?" one of the white men asked.

"Yes, sir," Uncle Cleve nodded as he watched me load the truck for the very first time.

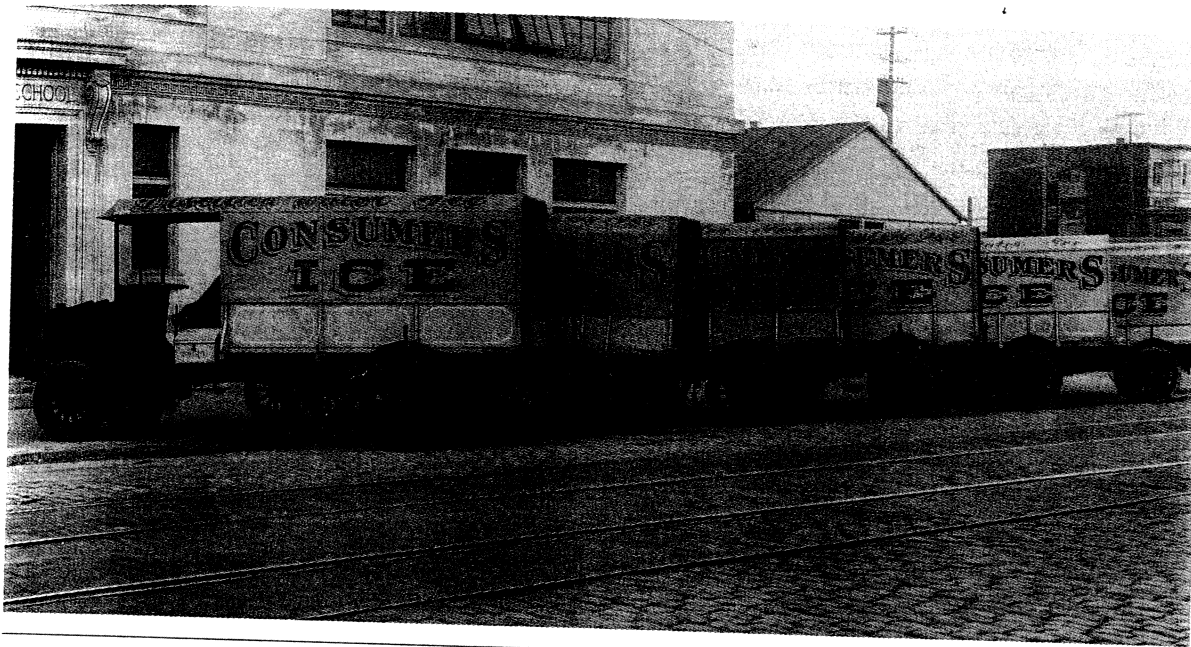
My ride home could not have been sweeter. Uncle Cleve stopped by a local store and bought me a large grape soda and a moon pie<sup>3</sup>—my reward. We didn't say much on the way back, but we both knew it had been a good day.

Many months later, nearing the end of the summer, Uncle Cleve promised to take me with him to Jackson as a gift for having done a good job for him. The day of our trip finally arrived. It started out as one of the happiest days of my life. My uncle was taking me to Jackson to the biggest tent show that had ever come our way. Ma Ponk got me all dressed up in my Sunday church clothes, combed my hair until my scalp was sore, and had me ready at least two hours early. Uncle Cleve was a slow driver, so we were going to leave in plenty of time to get to the seven o'clock grand opening.

I was ready at three o'clock and sitting out on the front steps waiting for the familiar sound of Uncle's 1947 green International truck that purred like a kitten. Ma Ponk and I were waiting, and there was absolutely no way of missing Uncle Cleve. When the truck pulled up, I almost jumped

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3. **moon pie**: a round chocolate-covered marshmallow candy.



Underwood Photo Archives.

out of my pants, but Uncle Cleve only smiled slightly as I ran around to the passenger's side and tucked myself firmly in, secure with the knowledge that tonight was going to be a really big night for me. Uncle Cleve was very confident, only telling me that he never messed with the small-town minstrel shows<sup>4</sup> that came to Glen Allan to rob you blind. If he was going to waste his time and spend his money, it would be at something like the big show that we were going to in Jackson.

I know I counted every tree and rock between Glen Allan and Jackson, because Uncle drove so slowly. He never hurried about anything. Moving meticulously, like a well-greased snail, he'd get the work of two men done in half the time. His driving was

the same perfect execution of the rules, never speeding, just fast enough to beat running.

It was almost 150 miles to Jackson. Ma Ponk didn't even pack me a lunch, because Uncle Cleve had promised to buy my lunch. Packed lunches in greasy brown paper bags were for old church ladies, not the two of us.

Finally we reached Jackson. There were more bright lights than I had ever seen. This was a large city, not like Glen Allan. Uncle Cleve took the city in stride. After all, he had been to Memphis, and Jackson was just another city to him. To me, however, Jackson was the biggest and the brightest. It

4. **minstrel shows**: variety shows featuring white performers with blackened faces.

even had uniformed policemen directing the traffic, and I saw my first traffic jam.

I was so excited about being in a city I didn't realize we had gotten near the show grounds. There seemed to be hundreds of cars and people. But my uncle knew where we were going. He parked the truck and held my hand tightly as we followed the crowd. Finally we got to the main gate, where a big curly-headed white man reached down and took our tickets. We were ushered in with the crowds of other people to a tent that seemed big enough to cover the whole world.

White people were everywhere, laughing and talking and eating popcorn and pulling their children behind them, as we all headed toward the big tent.

It was so crowded in the tent and we were so far back that I could hardly see, but I remember when those gigantic curtains opened and I saw all those beautiful ladies in sequined stockings.<sup>5</sup> I could hardly sit

still. I know I was too small to fully appreciate that beauty, but the glitter I understood. The music was loud all around us, and sweaty men were yelling and whistling; but my uncle just smiled slightly, ate one piece of popcorn at a time, and watched.

We couldn't have been there any more than twenty minutes when the usher came over to us and said, "I am sorry, but this ain't the night for niggers."<sup>6</sup>

My uncle's smile dropped from his face, and his warm eyes became cold as steel as he jerked me up and we walked out. We hadn't even seen half the show.

The long trip back was completely silent. I sat in the car, miserable, trying not to cry. I was too young to understand why this had happened to us, and my uncle would not explain. ❧

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5. **sequined stockings**: stockings decorated with small shiny disks.

6. **niggers**: *slang*, a derogatory name for African Americans. The word is considered to be extremely offensive.